

The Delicate and Sensitive Nature of Church Security:

Churches by virtue of their nature and their openness tend to attract all types of individuals. Their nature is one of invitation; which is deeply embedded in the gospel teachings. The gospel teachings proclaim a universal welcome to all; and this is how it should be. This presents some very unique challenges within these sensitive and delicate environments. One must be careful as to not be overbearing and appear aggressive and stiff, we also cannot afford to be naive and indifferent to the churches need for implementing security initiatives.

The challenge is to obtain a healthy balance, which is essential for the ministry/work. Critical to our efforts is the understanding of the ebbs and flows of the emotional and spiritual aspects within the church; this is a must, if we are to be successful.



Vulnerability Assessments:

The vulnerability of any institution is based upon several risk factors, but generally the more open an institution, the more vulnerable. Churches are no exception to the rule; in fact churches are much more vulnerable than most other institutions. Corporations are more of a controlled environment while schools and universities are semi-controlled but often resemble open environments. Shopping malls, some sporting venues and large outdoor campuses present similar challenges that make them vulnerable, but churches have their own distinct uniqueness.

Deviants and Criminals:

Furthermore some houses of worship are extremely vulnerable and viable hunting grounds for deviants and criminals. These guys are highly skilled at manipulation and exploiting the compassionate and forgiving nature of church goers. Criminals were never intended to enter these sacred places to perpetrate their crimes and practice their aberrant behavior. The gospel invitation was solely for redemptive purposes. This is a difficult concept for many to process. A skilled practitioner will delicately help navigate the balance of what is needed to develop and maintain a safe place to worship.

Prudence should guide the churches leadership as they seek to develop and improve on their security and safety initiatives.

Vulnerability assessments should include the basics;

1. Facility/Campus Risk and Vulnerability Assessments
2. The Mission and Vision of the Church.
3. Church Services, Community Outreaches, Extracurricular activities
4. Child Safety Protocols, Youth Services
5. All Hazards Approach...

The Development of Security Teams:

Terminology varies from church to church; some prefer the use of softer titles such as greeters, life safety teams, ushers etc.... while others have no concern with identifying their team as a security ministry. It is recommended that you discuss these security initiatives carefully and skillfully with the church leadership and board members. Your initial approach can either help or hurt you.

Many churches work on enlisting volunteers and developing them through the appointed leadership and training. The volunteers are typically church members from various professional backgrounds. We had plumbers, building managers, hair stylists, teachers and more. We also had law enforcement, correction officers, but all received the training needed to work efficiently within a church environment.

Our Focus ... A Proactive Approach:

As a Security Professional and Director, working in a large church in New York City, I was responsible for posting the volunteer security staff throughout the premises. The security team certainly could have easily served as a deterrent. They could also watch, wait and respond should an incident occur. But I found that a proactive approach is the absolute best practice in crime prevention and maintaining a safe and secure place to worship.



Behavioral Training Gave Us The Operational Tools to Succeed:

Our security team would quickly learn to understand the value of such training because of the complex and challenging scenarios we encountered. We knew that we needed to develop a thorough understanding of the risks and threats of violence that are plaguing our society, because the church is not exempt from the prevalence of violence. Sadly; many churches continue to be viable hunting grounds for criminally minded individuals, because it presents little risk to the offender.

The demographics and geographical locations of churches will also impact on the frequency of these challenges as will the churches specific vision and mission.

Our approach was focused upon developing an advanced understanding of the behavioral sciences which would give us further insight into aspects of violence/crime prevention and a much better understanding of threat analysis. We knew that this would be the foundation on which we would build and absolutely guide our tactical (physical security) and technical operations.

Our instructors were experts in the forensic behavioral sciences and they taught us a wide-range of material. Our training focus was intentional, diverse and highly specialized because of all the types of people and unique services that are provided within the church environment. We took courses on child safety, domestic disputes, emotional disturbances, violence prevention and intervention, emergency preparedness and response, protective protocols and so much more. Some may feel this a bit over the top, but I can assure you that we used every bit of training we received.

Our team was grateful for all the training and experiences we learned over the years, there is nothing like hands-on experience, which quickly matures your skills and abilities.

Below are scenarios, situations and questions that I am often asked about. Our team has effectively used and applied these behavioral techniques, in fact they can be incorporated anywhere.

I only mention and use three scenarios, there are many other aspects of our safety and security protocols which are outlined within our training programs.

Emotionally Disturbed Individuals:

Emotionally disturbed individuals are highly attracted to churches and one should be prepared to rapidly identify a potential concern. All concerns are not threats, but can be problematic if the security or greeters are not quick to discern, assess and handle the concern in a professional manner. All over the country people with emotional problems or mental illnesses find acceptance and support in churches. I am delighted that the church is a safe place where many can truly find hope and acceptance. Most indeed are physically harmless and need our support and care, but many encounters still tend to cause a great amount of anxiety and stress for those handling the situation. A trained team that quickly identifies the EDP or substance abuser will be better prepared to intervene before the situation escalates into an unpleasant incident.

There are some cases where an emotionally disturbed person is a threat to harm themselves or others. Handling these cases requires skill and creativity. De-escalation is the goal, and if possible attempt to establish a rapport. Example if you encounter a delusional individual, do not confront their delusions head on, try aligning yourself with their misconceptions, this approach is most effective and can assist the security professional in gaining helpful intelligence.



Worst Case Scenario...The Gunman:

Security must be vigilant and alert for worst case scenarios; such as a disturbed gunman walking into our place of worship and killing indiscriminately. A gunman may choose to conceal their weapon until the moment is right for them (Dylan Roof in Charleston South Carolina) or they may breach the ingress brandishing the weapon.

He Chose a Church Because That Setting Posed Little Danger to Him:

If you uncomfortable, uncertain or concerned that a shooting incident is possible then a team member should carefully monitor the hands and maintain constant visibility. These are guiding principles for all security professionals especially those in protective services. We know that the eyes can intimidate, the feet can maim and the hands can kill, they are the killing instrument used in all shootings.

Nowadays churches and other faith-based organizations should seriously consider the concept of armed security, at the very least somebody responsible should be ready to respond, and should the worst happen. There are all kinds of training programs geared toward the active shooter scenario, please avail yourself to one of them.

The Pedophile and Child Molester:

Youth-serving organizations are highly attractive environments to child molesters and pedophiles and churches certainly fit the criteria.

I feel these guys should be on top of list, due to the fact that they prey on the most vulnerable in our society. I must also add our special needs population must have our protection whatever their age. Child safety is highly important and churches have a vested interest in providing services for children and youth. We must do our due diligence in ensuring their safety from sexual offenders, it is our responsibility. There are countless stories that tell us we must take the appropriate action. Consider the legal ramifications if we fail to address these aspects.

Many pedophiles and child molesters are highly skilled at manipulation and often go undetected in criminal background checks. They know how to manipulate administration in order to gain access into their preferential pool of victims. There are certain identifiable red flags and behaviors that are long-term and persistent with such offenders. Therefore having trained professionals who understand the deviant nature of child sex offenders can serve as a huge advantage to any church or faith-based organization.

A Spiritual Tightrope:

Security professionals who serve in churches must learn to walk a spiritual tightrope and understand the ebbs and flows of the environment in order to maximize the effectiveness of the work. A proactive approach is the most prudent of all in an attempt to harden the target and prevent any hurt or harm to the people we are entrusted to protect. Let us not make it easy for those who seek to do us harm in these sacred places.